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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the social role understanding of 72 children aged 5, 8, and 11 years. An illustrated story, written especially for the project, was used as the basis for conducting a semistructured interview with each child. The main aspects examined included role definition and children's understanding of the role's characteristics; and the status and importance of social role expectations. Results revealed significant differences in understanding between the three age groups. The youngest children defined roles in terms of the specific actions and salient perceptual details of familiar people who normally performed the role. These children showed no awareness of possible differences in expectations between and within roles according to role relationship, and conceived role expectations as inflexible laws. The understanding of these children was characterized by its rigid, static, and behavioral qualities. The older children increasingly defined roles by giving an abstract definition encompassing a variety of actions and referring to their societal function. These children showed understanding of differences in expectations in both overt behavior and covert role-associated attributes according to role relationship, and were able to accept deviations from the stereotypic expectations normally observed. Results were discussed in relation to previous research and the symbolic interactionist interpretation of the characteristics and importance of social role understanding. (Author/RH)

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL ROLE UNDERSTANDING

Margaret A. Hardman

Paper presented to the British Psychological Society Developmental Section Annual Conference held at the University of York, 11-14th September 1987.

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Abstract

This study investigated the social role understanding of 72 children aged five, eight and eleven years. An especially written, illustrated story was used as the basis for conducting a semi-structured interview with each child. The main aspects examined included role definition, and understanding of the characteristics, status and importance of social role expectations. Results revealed significant differences in understanding between the three age groups. The youngest children defined roles in terms of the specific actions and salient perceptual details of familiar people normally performing the role, showed no awareness of possible differences in expectations between and within roles according to role relationship, and conceived role expectations as inflexible laws. This understanding was characterised by its rigid, static and behavioural qualities. The older children increasingly defined roles by giving an abstract definition encompassing a variety of actions and referring to their societal function, showed understanding of differences in expectations in both overt behaviour and more covert role-associated attributes according to role relationship, and were able to accept deviations from the stereotypic expectations normally observed. These results are discussed in relation to previous research, and the symbolic interactionist interpretation of the characteristics and importance of social role understanding.

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL ROLE UNDERSTANDING

The characteristics and importance of social role understanding have traditionally been one of the main concerns of symbolic interactionism. According to this theoretical perspective, such understanding is described in terms of an interlocking system of reciprocal expectations (Turner, 1962; Stryker and Statham, 1985). This system has both predictive and interpretative value, in making sense of the behaviour of others and in guiding the individual's own behaviour.

Despite the importance of social role understanding in providing a framework for effective social interaction, very few studies have been concerned with its development in children. The three main areas of research undertaken have examined pre-school children's understanding through role-playing (Anderson, 1977; Matthews, 1977; Garvey, 1977; Watson and Fischer, 1980; Corsaro, 1979, 1985; Fein, 1984; McLoyd et al, 1985), role definition (Piaget, 1928, Danziger, 1957; Haviland and Clark, 1974; Friedland, 1973; Chambers and Tavuchis, 1976; Macaskill, 1982; Watson, 1984) and understanding of role conservation (Chambers and Tavuchis, 1976; Jordan, 1980; Watson 1984). These have indicated that social role understanding is not acquired in an all or none fashion, but is gradually constructed and undergoes qualitative changes. However, the majority of previous developmental research has been almost exclusively confined to understanding of kinship roles, and has addressed such understanding in a static, descriptive manner.

AIM OF STUDY

This study attempted to interpret the nature of social role understanding in the wider, more constructive and flexible manner implied by symbolic

interactionism. Its aim was to examine in some depth three main aspects - (1) role definition, (2) understanding of the characteristics of social role expectations, and (3) understanding of the status and importance of social role expectations - in children aged between five and twelve years.

METHOD

The method employed was that of reading an especially written, illustrated story which provided the context for a semi-structured interview. The aspects of social role understanding examined, the questions employed, and the hypotheses made on the basis of previous research were as follows.

QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESES

(1) Role Definition

According to the symbolic interactionist persepctive, a social role is a classificatory term referring to a meaningful unit of social behaviour, guided by some overall purpose or aim.

In this study, the children's definition of a role was investigated by asking "What is a ...?". The roles examined included those of headmaster, teacher, pupil, policeman, nurse, doctor, matron and bank manager.
On the basis of previous research by Friedland (1973), the hypothesis was made that there would be an age-related trend from defining a role in terms of specific and typical actions, to defining a role according to its societal function.

(2) The Characteristics of Social Role Expectations

One of the major characteristics of social role expectations emphasised by the symbolic interactionist perspective is their dynamic and inter-related nature. Thus role expectations are "ideal conceptions", always liable to change or modification in relation not only to one, but any number of other reciprocal roles with varying degrees of relationship. In contrast, previous developmental studies have examined children's ability to define role expectations in terms of a single relationship (e.g. Piaget, 1928; Danziger, 1957; Haviland and Clark, 1974; Chambers and Tavuchis, 1976; Macaskill, 1981; Watson, 1984).

In this study, the child's understanding of the dynamic, inter-related nature of role expectations was examined in four different types of question:

(i) "Role Contrast": this question investigated understanding of possible differences in role expectations when the same person performed two contrasting roles on two different occasions. (e.g. "Do you think Matthew's mother would behave differently at school when she is a teacher than when she is a mother?")

(ii) "Role Set": this question examined understanding of differences in expectations within a role in the context of a familiar role set with a well-defined status hierarchy. (e.g. "Does a teacher behave any differently to a headmaster than she does to a pupil?", "Do you think a doctor behaves in a different way to a matron than he does to a nurse?")

(iii) "Role Associated Attributes": a third type of question examined understanding of differences in expectations according to role-associated attributes and prerequisites.
(e.g. "Do you think you have to be a special sort of person to be a ... (teacher, nurse, doctor)?")

(iv) "Role Conflict" : this question examined understanding of possible difficulties incurred when one person attempted to perform two roles, with conflicting expectations, in one context.
(e.g. "What do you think it would be like for Matthew's mother to have Matthew in her class at school?")

As no previous research had specifically addressed this aspect of social role understanding, these questions were exploratory and no hypotheses could be made.

(3) The Status and Importance of Social Role Expectations

In order to understand the range of possible overt and covert expectations associated with a particular role, the individual must be able to appreciate not only their relational nature, but also be able to organise these expectations. It is in coordinating these reciprocal expectations within their wider societal context that they enable the individual to predict and interpret social behaviour.

The results of studies undertaken by Turiel (1978) and Furth (1980) suggest that understanding of the societal framework guiding role expectations is only gradually constructed by the child. More recently Watson (1984) examined understanding of family role networks and the coordination of role expectations to form flexible systems. He suggests

that the development of this understanding allows the child to accept deviations from the expectations normally observed, whilst defining roles in terms of necessary and sufficient characteristics. As these family role networks are intercoordinated, role definitions and expectations are perceived in an ever widening societal context.

In this study, three types of question examined children's understanding of the status and importance of social role expectations. These were concerned with:

(i) "Forms of Address": "Why do you think pupils call their teachers by their surnames?"

(ii) "Dress": "Why do you think a bank manager wears a suit?"

(iii) "Sex Role Conventions" : "Do you think a man could be a nurse?"

These questions were similar to those employed by Turiel (1978). On the basis of the results of this study, the hypothesis was made that there would be an age-related trend towards increasing understanding of role expectations as societal conventions, and flexibility in accepting deviations from the norm.

SUBJECTS AND PROCEDURE

A total of 72 children from two different schools near Manchester, were randomly selected within the age range 5 - 5½ (n = 24), 8 - 8½ (n = 24), and 11 - 11½ (n = 24). There were equal numbers of boys and girls. The story was read, and the interview conducted with the children individually. Each session was tape recorded and subsequently transcribed.

RESULTS

On examination of the transcripts several types of response to each question were isolated and grouped into two main categories.

(1) Role Definition

In respect of the questions relating to "role definition", Category I included "abstract" role definitions which covered a variety of actions, rather than one specific act, and referred to the societal function of the role (e.g. "A headmaster is a person who is in charge of the school", "A policeman is a person who keeps law and order"). Category II included "behavioural" role definitions which described a specific action or perceptual detail of the person normally associated with the role (e.g. "A headmaster gives you the belt", "A policeman is a man who drives a car and wears a big helmet").

Two main types of analysis were undertaken. In the first, a mode category of response was calculated for each child. A Chi Square test (Siegel, 1956, p. 104) revealed a significant difference in the frequency of mode Category I and II responses between the three age groups as a whole (Chi = 37.4; df = 2; $p < .0005$). Fisher tests (Siegel, 1956, p. 96) undertaken (within each school) revealed significant differences between the five and eight year olds, and five and eleven year olds. There were no significant differences in the mode category of response between the eight and eleven year old children.

In the second type of analysis, the overall percentage of Category I and II responses to all the role definition questions was calculated for each child. The mean percentage of responses in both categories, for each age group, is illustrated in histogram form in Figure I. This shows the gradual increase

in Category I responses over the age range studied.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

Using the percentage of Category I responses over all questions as a "score" for each child, one way analysis of variance (age x percentage of Category I responses) revealed a significant difference between the three age groups overall ($F = 18.60$; $df = 2, 69$; $p < .0005$). More detailed analysis between the age groups by T Test (Greene and d'Oliveira, 1982, p. 85) revealed significant differences between the five and eight year olds ($T = -3.98$; $df = 46$; $p < .005$), the five and eleven year olds ($T = -6.00$, $df = 46$; $p < .005$), and the eight and eleven year olds ($T = -2.08$; $df = 46$; $p < .025$).

These results support the hypothesis made on the basis of Friedland's (1973) study, and reveal an age related trend from giving first "behavioural" and increasingly "abstract" role definitions. Thus, the definitions of the youngest children showed they were unable to separate the familiar person performing the role and the specific behaviours normally observed, from the societal nature of the role itself. These definitions were simply descriptions of various different actions and perceptual details of familiar people. The older children increasingly demonstrated an understanding of the distinction between the role and the person performing it. Definitions were given which encompassed a variety of different actions and referred to the societal function of the role.

(2) The Characteristics of Social Role Expectations

In respect of the four types of question relating to understanding of the dynamic, inter-related nature of role expectations, responses were again grouped into two main categories.

Category I included all responses which showed understanding of differences in role expectations, both overt and covert, according to the relationship of the role to reciprocal roles. In the "role contrast" question, Category I responses were those which referred to differences in expectations according to the demands and expectations of role partners. In the "role set" question this understanding was reflected in references to differences in role expectations and attributes according to status or function within the role set. In the "role-associated attributes" question Category I responses were those which showed some understanding of possible attributes associated with a particular role, and made some attempt at explaining why these were needed in terms of the societal function of the role, or the demands of role partners. In the "role conflict" question Category I responses were those demonstrating some awareness of the possible psychological difficulty involved in balancing and resolving the conflicting demands of both roles.

Category II responses were those which showed no understanding of expectations changing according to role relationship. This included responses in which the child stated there were no differences between the expectations of two different roles ("role contrast" and "role set" questions), there were no special attributes demanded by a particular role ("role-associated attributes" question), there was no psychological difficulty involved in performing two roles simultaneiously ("role conflict" question) or where the child simply compared expectations between and within roles in terms of observed behavioural differences in specific actions or perceptual details.

Two types of analysis were again undertaken. The mode category of response was first calculated for each child. The results of 3 x 2 Chi Square tests (age x category of response) revealed significant differences between the

three age groups as a whole on the questions relating to "role contrast" (Chi = 10.4; df = 2; p = <.01), "role associated attributes" (Chi = 7.5; df = 2; p = <.02), and "role conflict" (Chi = 13.8; df = 2; p = <.001). There were insufficient responses by the five year olds to the "role set" question for a Chi Square test to be carried out. The results of Fisher tests carried out between the age groups (within each school) on each type of question suggested that the main difference in category response was between the five and eight year olds, compared with the eleven year old children.

The percentage of Category I and II responses combined over all four types of question was then calculated for each child. The mean percentage of responses in both categories for each age group is illustrated in histogram form in Figure 2. This shows the comparatively small proportion of Category I responses given by the five and eight year olds compared with the older, eleven year old children.

[Insert Figure 2 about here]

The percentage of Category I responses over all four types of question was again used as a "score" for each child. One way analysis of variance (age x percentage of Category I responses) revealed a significant difference between the three age groups as a whole (F = 37.81; df = 2, 69; p = <.001). More detailed analysis by T test revealed significant differences in the percentage of Category I responses between the five and eight year olds (T = -3.19; df = 46; p = <.01), the five and eleven year olds (T = -7.76; df = 46; p = <.001), and the eight and eleven year old children (T = -5.28; df = 46; p = <.001).

These results suggest that the youngest children either had difficulty in understanding the questions themselves, or were unable to understand the distinction between the role and the person performing it. Thus, expectations did not change according to role relationship, but changed because a particular activity was normally associated with the person typically performing it. At eight years of age this latter type of response was characteristic of the understanding of the majority of the children. However, at this age some children also showed some awareness that expectations changed according to more covert attributes and traits. Whilst at eight years of age these responses were not frequent, and were not normally elaborated, by eleven years of age the children not only more frequently referred to changes in role-associated attributes, but went on to explain the reasons for these in terms of the function and status of the role to related roles.

(3) The Status and Importance of Social Role Expectations

In respect of the three types of question examining understanding of the status and importance of social role expectations, Category I responses were those which demonstrated understanding of their status as societal conventions and of their social interactive function. Thus forms of address were governed by politeness and/or status considerations. The way a person was dressed affected their own or their organisation's social reputation and/or reflected status divisions and obligations to role partners. Sex role conventions were governed by societal expectations and deviations could, and frequently did, occur.

Category II included all responses which showed the child's understanding of these expectations as having the status of inflexible "laws", whereby what normally occurs has to occur. Thus, there was no other way of addressing a teacher, she was "Miss", a bank manager had to wear a suit or he wouldn't be

a bank manager. No deviations to sex role conventions could, or did, occur.

In the analysis of the results, the category of response to each of the three questions was first calculated for each child. Chi Square tests (age x category of response revealed significant differences between the three age groups as a whole in the frequency of resonse Category I and II to the question relating to "Forms of Address" ($Chi = 8.9$; $df = 2$; $p < .01$), "Dress" ($Chi = 8.1$; $df = 2$; $p < .01$), and "Sex Role Conventions" ($Chi = 7.8$; $df = 2$; $p < .025$). More detailed analysis by Fisher test (within each school) suggested that the main differences were between the five and eight year olds compared with the eleven year old children.

The percentage of Category I and II responses over all three types of question was then calculated for each child. The mean percentage of responses in both categories for each age group is illustrated in Figure 3. This shows the gradual increase in the percentage of Category I responses between five and eleven years of age.

[Insert Figure 3 about here]

Using the percentage of Category I responses over all three types of question as a "score" for each child, one way analysis of variance (age x percentage of Category I responses) revealed a significant difference between the three age groups as a whole ($F = 20.54$; $df = 2, 69$; $p < .0005$). The results of T tests revealed significant differences between the five and eight year olds ($T = -2.88$; $df = 46$, $p < .005$), the five and eleven yearolds ($T = -6.64$; $df = 46$; $p < .0005$), and the eight and eleven year olds ($T = -3.392$; $df = 46$; $p < .005$).

DISCUSSION

The results of the questions regarding the status and importance of social role expectations confirm the hypothesis made on the basis of previous research by Turiel (1978) and Watson (1984), and put into a wider context the results of this study as a whole. It is suggested that these demonstrate that between five and eight years of age, children's social role understanding is much the same as their understanding of people in general. Thus, observed actions and salient perceptual characteristics of the people normally performing the role are described. There is no understanding of the societal nature of the role: a social role is the person normally performing it. Possible differences in role expectations are neither accepted, nor coordinated with existing understanding. This understanding can be characterised by its rigid, static and behavioural qualities.

At eight years of age, the majority of children still demonstrate this understanding. However, at this age some children begin to be able to coordinate the activities normally observed, and define roles in a more abstract way, referring to a variety of actions. Role expectations are beginning to be described in terms of possible role-associated attributes, and roles seen in terms of their functional relatedness.

By the age of eleven years, a significant proportion of children demonstrate an understanding of roles as being distinct from the person performing them. They are able to describe roles by giving an abstract definition encompassing a variety of actions. Understanding of their dynamic, inter-relational characteristics and their societal, rather than personal nature, is increasingly demonstrated in the ability to describe differences in role expectations according to the function and status of the role to reciprocal roles. Social

role understanding is more flexible and certain deviations from the norm can be accepted. These results indicate that by eleven years of age such understanding is beginning to be organised and coordinated in a way which suggests that social roles are seen as part of a wider, societal system.

These results confirm and extend those of previous studies. They also provide some support for predictions made on the basis of the two "constructivist" theories of Mead (1934) and Piaget. Thus, Mead's description of the development of role-taking would suggest that it is not until children can take the role of the "generalised other" and thereby coordinate the function of different roles with a system, that the purpose motivating the role behaviour observed can be fully appreciated. Similarly, Piaget's description of the characteristics of reflective, formal operational thought would suggest that only at this stage would children demonstrate understanding of reciprocity within a unified, coordinated system.

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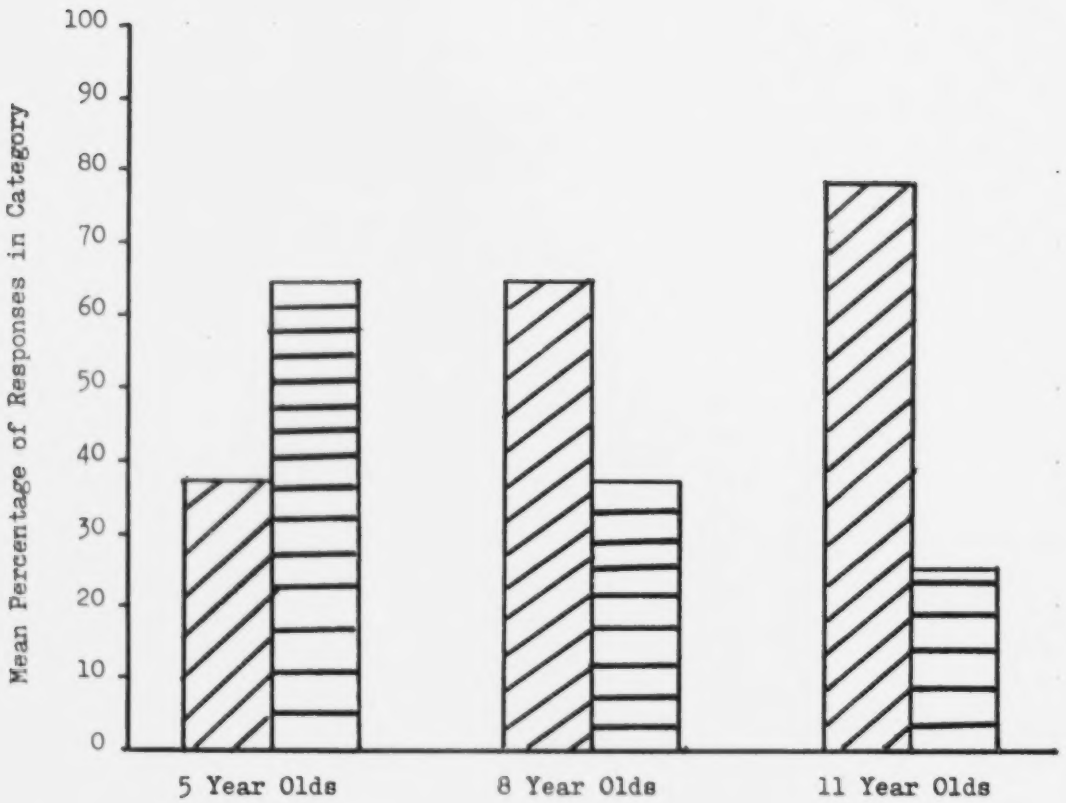
FIGURE 1 : ROLE DEFINITION

Histogram Showing the Mean Percentage of Responses in Category I and Category II for each Age Group

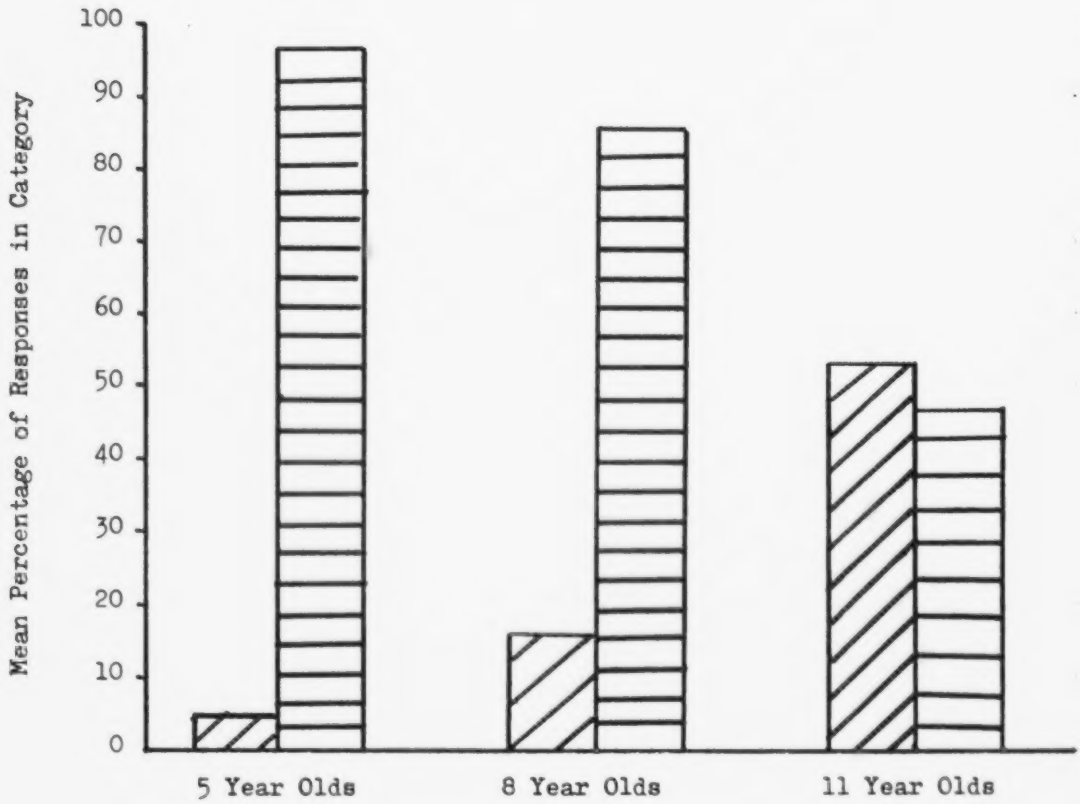


Key: Mean Percentage of Responses in Category I

Mean Percentage of Responses in Category II

FIGURE 2 : CHARACTERISTICS OF SOCIAL ROLE EXPECTATIONS

Histogram Showing the Mean Percentage of Responses in Category I and Category II for each Age Group

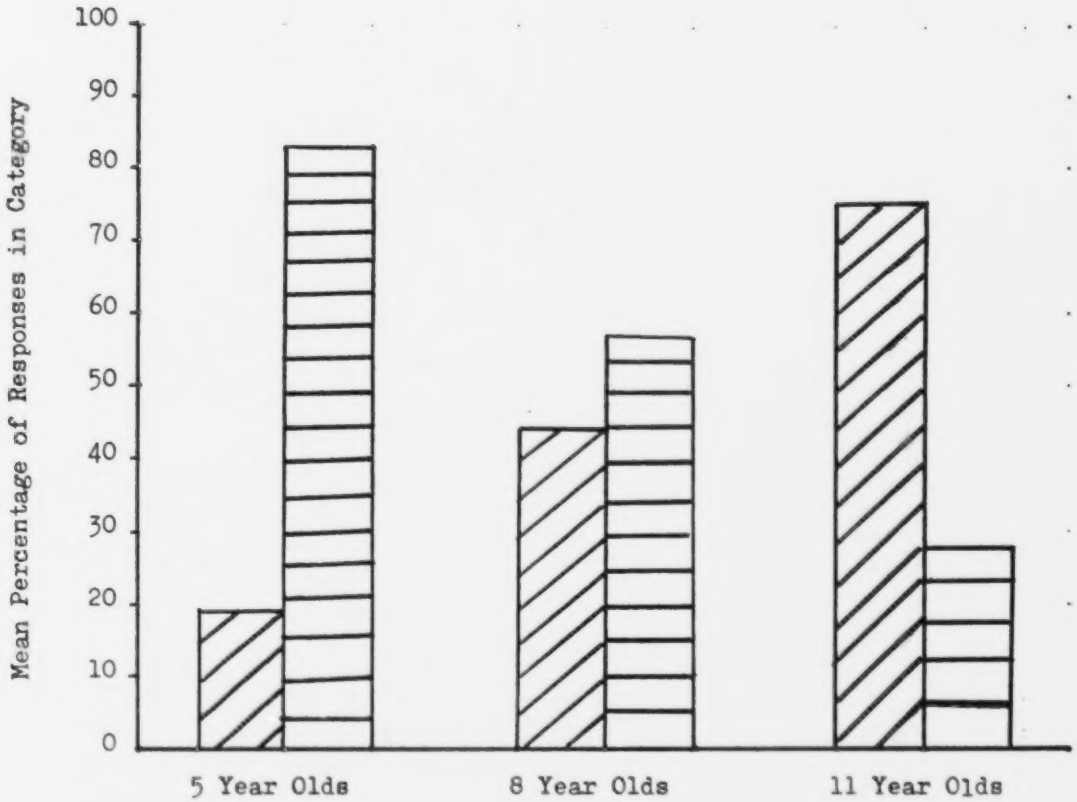


Key: Mean Percentage of Responses in Category I

Mean Percentage of Responses in Category II

FIGURE 3 : STATUS AND IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL ROLE EXPECTATIONS

Histogram Showing the Mean Percentage of Responses in Category I and Category II for each Age Group



Key: Mean Percentage of Responses in Category I

Mean Percentage of Responses in Category II